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Citation for published version:

Hoek, L 2020, 'When celluloid pornography went digital: Class and race in the Bangladeshi cut-piece online', *Porn Studies*, vol. 7, no. 1, pp. 97-114. <https://doi.org/10.1080/23268743.2019.1607539>

Digital Object Identifier (DOI):

[10.1080/23268743.2019.1607539](https://doi.org/10.1080/23268743.2019.1607539)

Link:

[Link to publication record in Edinburgh Research Explorer](#)

Document Version:

Peer reviewed version

Published In:

Porn Studies

Publisher Rights Statement:

This is an Accepted Manuscript of an article published by Taylor & Francis in *Porn Studies* on 19 June 2019, available online: <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/23268743.2019.1607539>

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When Celluloid Pornography Went Digital: Class and Race in the Bangladeshi Cut-Piece Online

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Word Count: 9927

Abstract

This article investigates the fate of celluloid pornography after the end of film. With the demise of celluloid filmmaking in Bangladesh and the rapid transitioning of film projection to digital forms, bits and pieces of stray sexually explicit celluloid have migrated to digital formats. In this article, I map the movement of so-called 'cut-pieces', locally produced strips of illegal celluloid pornography, onto online forums patronized by Bengali speakers. Exploring the reception of this sexually explicit material in its new digital environment, I ask the following questions: how are the traces of 'locality' that inflected the celluloid production of cut-pieces received within digital spaces of consumption? What happens to markers of class and race when celluloid forms of pornography move onto digital platforms? And what are the cultural and technological limits to the internationalization of the aesthetic of mainstream pornography?

Keywords: celluloid, pornography, online, race, class, Bangladesh

They are back

The mid-2000s were a high water point for the production and circulation of sexually explicit celluloid clips known as 'cut-pieces' in the Bangladesh film industry (see Hoek 2014). A lively production of low-investment Bangladeshi action films provided the vehicle for the making and circulating of cut-pieces. Produced as part of action films but not censored for public exhibition, these short celluloid sequences were illegally produced by Bangladeshi film crews in Bangladesh, featuring Bangladeshi actors. The cut-pieces were illegally screened in the many single screen cinema halls of Bangladesh. The arrival in 2007 of a political crisis, during which martial law was instated and a 'caretaker' government installed, pushed the phenomenon out from its existence in shadowy spaces of illegality and only semi-licit exhibition. With the excessively public arrests of producers and cinema hall owners, the paramilitary forces displayed new modes of sovereignty, including a 'cleaning up' of public and civil space (see Chowdhury 2014). Hundreds of businessmen and politicians were jailed, their bank accounts frozen. Simultaneously, the caretakers set out to beautify the city. As they jailed bankers and lawyers, they reclaimed city land on which high-rises had been built fraudulently. They turned them into lakes and ponds, with pleasant walkways and flowering bushes. The entire city became a project of cantonmentization: to mirror the orderly and well maintained army cantonment, with its lush greenery, that sits in the middle of the city of Dhaka. Beauty was forcefully imposed, a modern ordered polity envisioned, in which any form of spillage, any excesses of dirt and grime, had to be removed. And thus the caretakers cleaned up the 'obscene' film industry, raided brothels and tried to stamp out 'radical' Muslim groups. Any excessive affect had to be curtailed.

On January 12, 2009, the tabloid paper *Manobjomin* announced: *Ora abar asche*: 'they have returned.' Who was the paper speaking of? The return of parliamentary democracy, restored on December 29, 2008? Were they writing about the return of the then opposition party to political dominance in the wake of those elections? The apparent restoration of secularism? No, the tabloid spoke of only one transition that accompanied the democratic regime change: *Ora abar asche*: the pornographers are back. The paper warned: 'together with the coming of the new government, producers, directors and artists...who make and display obscene films are preparing to come back' (*Manobjomin* 2009).

In the eerily quiet lanes of the national film studio, the sentiment was one of relief. 'Finally a political government,' sighed the actresses who had waited idly for work for two years, 'shooting will start again.' The cameramen, the editors, the lightmen, everyone agreed, now that there was once again a so-called 'political government', filmmaking could resume once more. And from their self-imposed exile, the makers of sexually explicit cinema returned. But as they reconvened, they found an entirely changed media landscape. While cinema halls

had shut following the clampdown on popular cinema during the caretaker government, simultaneously, the participatory internet had blossomed in Bangladesh (Hussain and Mostafa 2016). Cut-pieces, the bread and butter of the Bangladeshi celluloid pornographers, had made a transition during the caretaker years, out of the cinema halls and onto the internet. Not long after, the celluloid facilities in the national film studios were shut down, taking with them the vestiges of celluloid production and circulation that had carried the cut-pieces into the rural hinterlands. Alongside these processes, the existing cut-pieces had become further detached from their parent films, decontextualized as ‘microporn’ (Brennan 2018) and reformed into digitally circulating goods, collected by enthusiasts, and now finding new audiences as part of a ‘pirate archive’ (Tanvir 2013). The production of new celluloid cut-pieces had been foreclosed in Bangladesh but the existing clips had found new digital lives.

This article maps the transition of the Bangladeshi cut-piece from their celluloid cinema hall exhibition to digital online circulation. The question I ask is what happens when this very distinctive sexually explicit material changes over to new technological platforms. I will show that the cut-pieces’ distinct aesthetic, and the particular cultural and social formations in which they originated, were re-valued as they made the transition from celluloid to digital formats. As Brennan recently noted, there is a distinct ‘impact of certain digital conditions on pornography’ (2018, 1) but I will show that this impact is not generic but can be decisively shaped by the *regional* specificities of the pornographic imagery under discussion. Exploring the life of this sexually explicit material in its new digital environment, I will focus my discussion around three broad themes: media specificity (what happens when pornographic fragments move between different media); race (how might we rethink the question of race in online pornography that is not thematized for its colour and not staged for the white gaze?); and locality (how are the traces of ‘locality’ that inflected the celluloid production of cut-pieces received within digital spaces of consumption and how does this highlight the question of the region rather than that of the national?). In particular, I will argue that it is the context of exhibition and reception that can determine whether particular on-screen bodies are understood as primarily marked by race or class, rather than being unambiguously anchored within the representational space of the screen. This argument is informed by anthropological ways of thinking about imagery: first, by anthropology’s doubts about the capacity of the image to self-evidently and unambiguously make statements about race (Poole 2003) and second, because of (media) anthropologists’ methodological tendency towards studying the social contexts of production and consumption to understand the nature of a media artefact (for example, Ginsburg, Abu-Lughod and Larkin 2002). Finally, my questions about the movement of celluloid cut-pieces onto the internet also urge a reflection on how we might document a specific historical moment in the ephemeral transitioning of particular modalities of pornography across different media platforms. The form of this article underscores this effort

at documentation. I aim to contribute to a particular media archaeology in the study of South Asian cinema, in which cut-pieces and similar celluloid pornographic artefacts persist and 'remain viable beyond their historical moment' (Mahadevan 2015, 5). The article follows the cut-pieces across three different media platforms: celluloid reels, VCDs and online chatrooms. The ways in which the cut-pieces signify in each of these sites is markedly different, shedding light on the ways in which the material specificities of different media impact the ways in which pornography can come to excite. The sections on celluloid and VCD forms of the cut-piece are descriptive and provide the backdrop to a more ethnographically rendered account of their appearance online that follows.

Celluloid pornography in Bangladesh at the start of the 21st century

The cut-piece is a highly particular form of celluloid pornography. Its aesthetic and material forms are distinct and resulted from its particular modes of production, circulation and exhibition in the early 21st century in Bangladesh. I have described all these at length elsewhere (Hoek 2010, 2014) but it bears repetition in the context of understanding the transition of this sexually explicit material to new media platforms and modes of circulation.

Cut-pieces are illegal strips of celluloid pornography that were produced as part of action films made in Bangladesh through the Film Development Corporation (FDC) from the 1990s through the 2000s. They were made as integral parts of popular action films, which had dominated the cinema screens in Bangladesh from the 1980s. The reasons for the shift to action cinema were manifold and interrelated. These included changes in the entertainment taxes raised by the government, the arrival of video and television, the abandonment of the cinema hall by female audiences, the decreasing desirability for middle class families of leisure activities in public spaces, and the shift of young and avant-garde filmmakers to new formats, including 16mm and later digital video. Along with the sorts of films screened, the demographic inside cinema halls changed, most prominently the withdrawal of women from the theatres. The emphasis on action cinema from the 1980s onwards (see Awwal 2018), has generated public controversy because of the ways in which these films came to be understood as 'vulgar' in the course of the 1990s. Partly, this relates to the unabashed lower middle class values expressed in the films and the working class audiences that came to be associated with them, but it was also due to the prevalence of sexually suggestive and explicit cut-pieces in these films.

Cut-pieces were produced as part of action films but have always circulated with some independence from the texts that they were part of. The name derives from the practice of cutting such sequences out of the films before they were submitted to the Censor Board. Even their production, however, occurred in conditions that can best be described as a form of public secrecy (Taussig 1999). Once the film of which the cut-pieces were part was censored, the cut-

pieces could be re-inserted but weren't necessarily so. If they were reinserted, this was done on a basis of financial and social expediency by producers, distributors, hall proprietors and projectionists. The cut-piece can be understood as a hard core 'number' (Williams 1989) that could be detached from its diegetic embedding within a particular film. Its potential for independent circulation, however, was restricted by its celluloid nature, which placed limits on its exhibition and kept it confined within domains of theatrical film exhibition.

Despite the possibility for material disembedding, the aesthetic form of the cut-piece betrayed its origins within popular Bangladeshi action cinema. The production values of that cinema were equivalent to those of the cut-pieces. The same crew, lights, camera, lab facilities, editors and projectors ensured an aesthetic coherence between the main body of the feature film and its cut-pieces, even when screened independently. Celluloid pornographic clips from popular Bangladeshi feature films are therefore immediately recognizable. Their technological quality, their soundscape, their colour schemes, the *mis-en-scène*, costumes, make-up and acting styles, all have great specificity. The nature of the bodies on display too, are highly distinctive, emphasizing voluptuous men and women, to the hilarity and disdain of elite commentators who appeared equally appalled and piqued by this bodily aesthetic. The aesthetic of the cut-piece emerged from the industrial context in which the films that housed the cut-pieces were produced and the imagination of the audience that animated these industrial production processes. I'll describe these in turn.

The technologies of film production at the FDC determined to a large extent the aesthetic of action cut-pieces. As the main production studio in the country, part of the Ministry of Information, the FDC rented its facilities to producers. These facilities were manned by technicians who were government employees. They deployed their craft in a highly standardized manner. The limited budgets of popular action film producers meant that the resulting films were extraordinarily formulaic. An FDC action film made in the 2000s could be recognized by such technical standards as their peculiar colour quality resulting from lighting techniques within the FDC, as well as the mix of film stock used, the limited use of colour correcting and the long-term re-use of lab chemicals. Similarly, editing practices limited to jump-cuts and to sound design that heavily reused a few stock sounds produced highly specific and standardized clips. The cut-pieces betrayed their FDC origins in these aesthetic attributes, as well as being marked physically from their frequent re-use, resulting in scratched celluloid.

In terms of the diegesis, cut-pieces were also limited in their forms and highly specific in their choreography (for a more detailed discussion of this, see Hoek 2010, 2014). I name these cut-pieces pornography as they hold up to Linda Williams' use of the word 'pornography' 'to signal the focus on explicitness and "maximum visibility" of sex acts in contradistinction to obfuscation of soft core' (2014, 33). Such sexually explicit imagery contained within short sequences of detachable celluloid would mostly appear as part of a song and dance sequence

or as part of a rape scene. In either, the emphasis was on the exposed female body, focusing particularly on breasts and buttocks. The sexual action was mostly explicit sex acts but could also feature simulation and involved the licking, kissing, squeezing and penetrating of exposed and fragmented female body parts, specifically the legs, breasts, nipples, buttocks and vagina of the female actress. This was generally performed by (partially) dressed male actors but sometimes by other female actresses. In cut-pieces, the camera rarely explored the male body although in some long-shots of a couple in simulated sex, the naked male buttocks might be the centre of the image. The characters in the scenes were largely secondary to the main narrative of the film and they were either played by minor actors appearing in the rest of the action film in a subplot or by actors specifically hired for the cut-piece sequence and appearing only there. The encounters portrayed were almost always between men and women. Violent rape scenes added shots of the pinning down of female characters and their struggle against their rapist, often using the intercutting of shots of struggling exposed legs and the naked breasts of the actress. In both violent and non-violent scenes of sexual encounter, the penis remained largely out of view while the camera's gaze and the actor's activities focused solely on the female body. This is where the sight of sexual pleasure is presented, often through the facial expressions of the female actress. The soundtrack either contained Bengali songs made for the cinema or international house music and instrumental renditions of classic pop songs. Diegetic sound was dubbed in sighs and screams.

The inscribed spectators of the popular celluloid action cinema of the early 21st century in Bangladesh were working class and lower middle class Bangladeshi men, mainly located in the rural areas and small towns of Bangladesh. Directors and producers as well as journalists were unanimous in their assessment of the audience for action cinema and its cut-pieces. They imagined a large market of poor, generally young, working class and rural men, who would attend the cinema halls to see pornography that they would be unable to access elsewhere. Ethnographic fieldwork in the cinema halls in Bangladesh showed that this assessment was not entirely incorrect. In the mid-2000s, when I did my fieldwork, the cinema halls, and action movies in general, were frequented almost exclusively by working class and lower middle class men, as well as schoolboys from middle class families in small towns. Films that were known to contain cut-pieces were hugely popular and would draw a crowd that spanned class positions and ages. Producers, directors and scriptwriters self-consciously aimed their work at what they imagined to be an undifferentiated working class audience located in the countryside. This is important because it meant that the sexually explicit imagery they produced was not made with any consideration of a non-Bangladeshi audience in mind. In effect, this pornography was not staged as ethnically or racially 'other' from its target audience. Race was not thematized in this material. Instead, class was a really important marker in these clips. Urban college girls wearing embroidered shalwar kameezes, doubly underscoring their

middle class status, were raped in these films. Similarly, girls who willingly engaged in sexual relations in such stories were inevitably portrayed as extraordinarily wealthy, residing in marble palaces in Dhaka. The heroes wore jeans and rode motorcycles or cars. Wealth eroticizes and encourages transgression. On the other hand, sexual violence was often perpetrated by those who drink alcohol, 'terrorists' or religious others. They are the constitutive outside of the narrative that is set within an ex-nominated and hegemonically Muslim social world. Alcoholics, gangsters, capitalists and Hindus perpetrated crimes against the proper moral order of the diegetic universe. Whilst race remained ex-nominated in these clips, it was class, and to a lesser extent religion, that was highlighted.

As a form of professionally produced, theatrically screened pornography, the Bangladeshi celluloid cut-piece was highly distinctive aesthetically and thematically due to the production values of a nationally organized celluloid cinema industry that catered to particular audiences as well as the concern with community and class that shaped its narratives. When this pornographic material traversed the digital divide and appeared on new media platforms, however, these pornographic 'numbers' came to take on completely different valences.

South Asian pornography on VCDs

When studying the circulation and exhibition of celluloid cut-pieces in cinema halls in Bangladesh in 2005, I followed the trail of the producers' assistants who travelled to remote cinema halls with film reels. Their job was to ensure the equitable division of profits, the proper exhibition of the reels, the avoidance of law-enforcers and journalists, as well as the surveillance of the theatre space to apprehend would-be pirates. Nonetheless, pirates did slip through. Entrepreneurs would set up video cameras in the cinema halls and film the screen to produce digital video versions of the films on display. Filming in cinema halls generated shareable digital forms of the cut-pieces. With editing software and the increased prevalence of cheap Chinese VCD players, and the arrival of locally produced, and therefore cheap, blank VCDs, these pirates started to produce cut-piece VCDs. Available in the markets of large cities and small towns alike, the VCD was for a while a massively available media carrier that was relatively inexpensive. Cut-piece VCDs explicitly recognized the pornographic cut-piece as a 'number' and were laid-out as a music album, with the individual pieces listed as separate items on a menu. The albums would be titled *Gorom Mosla* ('hot spice') or named after a particular actress who might, or might not, appear on the VCD.

The reduction of the cut-piece to an independent number, listed alongside other numbers and now entirely divorced from the cinematic apparatus in which it originated, allowed the cut-piece to be positioned as equivalent to other, similar, bits of pornography. While on one end of the spectrum a VCD might gather a series of cut-pieces alongside songs from a particular Bangladeshi actress, on the other, the Bangladeshi cut-pieces might now be

listed alongside similar but different clips from other parts of South Asia. In particular, Pakistani *mujra*, scenes from Pashto cinema, South Indian soft-porn clips, and music videos from across South Asia would appear listed with the Bangladeshi cut-pieces on the VCDs. Less often, short clips of Western pornography would appear on the VCDs. Now the cut-piece imagery was positioned alongside, and equivalent to, other bits of soft-core and hard-core pornography from the region and beyond. Decontextualized, the cut-pieces could appear as equivalent to other 'bits' and circulate in entirely new ways, via the marketplace and to be screened in private.

Despite such equivalences, and the erasure of the theatrical context of exhibition, the aesthetic form and language of the cut-pieces continued to make them immediately recognizable when encountered alongside other material. They stand out from Western produced pornography and from the sexually explicit or suggestive material made in Pakistan, Sri Lanka and South India due to the contingencies of the context in which the cut-pieces were produced. However, to place the conventions of celluloid pornography in Bangladesh within a strict national framework limits the way we can understand this material as South Asian. While its aesthetic differences from Western pornography were very clear, and perhaps explain the low levels of inclusion of Western porn on these sorts of VCDs, the pornographic bits from other parts of South Asia shared some formal characteristics while differing in others. I would suggest that similarities in narrative context, bodily form, mise-en-scène or costume are due to the type of cinema that is the vehicle for cut-pieces. These aesthetic traits were shared by Bangladeshi popular cinema with other low investment modes of film production in the region, for example Pakistan's Pashto cinema (Hulsing 2004; Khan and Ahmad 2010; Nabi 2017) and North India Bhojpuri cinema (Hardy 2010; Kumar 2016). These all drew on shared aesthetic repertoires and production conditions of what can be broadly termed the B-circuit in South Asian cinema (Srinivas 2003; Vasudevan et al. 2016), films destined for the 'segment of distribution and exhibition sectors that is characterized by low levels of investment' (Srinivas 2003, 49). In that segment, across the region, aesthetic similarities relating to editing choices, lighting practices, sound design, mise-en-scène and narrative structures of B-circuit action cinema can be discerned. The Bangladeshi B-circuit action film was heavily reliant on strong star-texts in action-heavy melodramatic narratives with stock characters and locations, taking inspiration from high-end national and international films to produce locally resonant action films (see also Hoek 2013). Visual similarities within this low investment segment across South Asia suggest that there are shared conditions under which remarkably similar aesthetic conventions have arisen. While comparative research across South Asia is rare, even a cursory glance across Pashto and Dhaka action cinema from the 2000s reveals a remarkably similar field of cinema production and consumption. In part these overlaps are due to the ways in

which action cinema as a global form has localized itself in particular ways (Morris 2004) and in part this is a story of South Asian B-circuit action cinema in the late 20th century.

The transition of Bangladeshi cut-pieces from celluloid to VCD allows the similarities among South Asian sexual imagery that originates in the lower levels of the region's film industries to come into focus. It highlights the nature of what might be considered a regional cinema (see Srinivas 2015). This is a *pornographic* region, which is associated with particularities of narrative, aesthetic and, significantly, particular types of bodies. Studying cinematic pornography in South Asia is a way to study cinema there without letting 'political geographical boundaries generate and limit research problems, creating hermetically sealed cultures and populations' (Srinivas 2015, vii). Instead, as Hardy (2015) has argued for Bhojpuri cinema, it is the cinematic discourse itself that produces a cohesive *regional* field of pornography, that crosses geographic as well as social boundaries, and is delimited by its aesthetic particularities; in this case the contingencies of the erotic pleasures located in the particular bodies, costumes, sex acts and mise-en-scène that are presented in clips of South Asian cinematic pornography. It is the transition of the cut-piece onto the VCD, enumerated in viewing lists that explicitly equate them with their regional counterparts and allow their reproduction in a single medium, and distributed locally, that makes the region tangibly present. From the VCD, a leap onto the internet was short and inevitable. The transition of the cut-pieces into online environments allowed this regional element to come even clearer into focus and to fundamentally shift the ways in which the pornographic content of the cut-pieces could be received. It is to this that I now turn, narrating the online encounter with cut-pieces in an ethnographic manner.

Cut-pieces in Chatrooms

From the circulation of the cut-pieces on VCD, it was a short step onto the chatrooms of the early participatory internet. There, while the film industry itself was in lock-down during the caretaker regime, Bengali language porn chatrooms circulated cut-pieces in their digital forms. Given the newly developing digital infrastructures, the chatrooms in the 2000s were full of patient consumers, spending long hours waiting for the download of digital videos that promised to contain Bangladeshi cut-pieces. The online chats resounded with expressions of impatience and the delayed gratifications that are native to pornography's narrative mode but were here exacerbated by very slow download speeds and frequent power cuts. It is these that I turn to in this section, which is inspired by the methodologies of digital ethnography (Horst and Miller 2012; Pink et al. 2016). This subfield is interested in 'how the digital has become part of the material, sensory and social worlds we inhabit' (Pink et. al. 2016, 7) and adapts ethnographic methods and anthropological theory to study such entanglements. The

discussion that follows shows how online pornography and its reception is socially and culturally embedded.

Joubon Jala and Porn Adda were two vBulletin Forums in which Bengali speakers exchanged pornographic imagery and texts in the 2000s, both now defunct. An analysis of the conversations around cut-pieces in these forums illustrates what happened when these very particular cinematic forms of pornography arrived online and reached new audiences in new contexts, finding themselves suddenly juxtaposed with very different pornographic material. Both websites were explicitly pornographic and asked their members to be over 21. The homepage for Joubon Jala introduced the site as 'an adult community for Bangla speakers from all over the world'. Both sites set out a series of guidelines and rules for user behaviour that were continuously negotiated in practice, often through a switching between languages and implicit rules of engagement. The Porn Adda forum rules stated, perhaps duplicitously, 'no obscene or controversial subject matter of any kind (this includes political commentary).' Similarly, while calling for moderation in article 3.16 by stating 'harassment or bashing based on sexual orientation, gender, race, color, religious views, or simply because their opinions differ from your own are not allowed,' article 3.13 stated that 'no kinds of religious or political topics are allowed. No kinds of pre-teen or child porn topics/images/videos/links posting is allowed. Same goes for the animal sex & Gay related things. We have a 0 tolerance policy on this one.' When a Joubon Jala member asked whether stories can include underage porn, a moderator tellingly suggested that: 'Uncle, if the story is in BENGALI, it's alright ... but if it is in English it is impossible. And pictures/video are out of the question. [...] That would create problems for all of us' (*Mamu, story BANGLAI hoile chole....kintu english e hoite parbone. Ar chobi/video'r proshno uthena. [...] eita amader shobar jonnoi trouble korbe*¹). Incest, however, was a favourite topic and formed the main topic of the *choti*, written Bengali pornography, that was featured on both sites. Neither protocol seemed too strictly maintained, however, and most outlawed articles could be found. References to male homosexuality were rare but could be found, inevitably wrapped up in a discussion of its appropriateness.

The sites addressed themselves explicitly to a Bengali audience. This was apparent from their names. While 'joubon jala' can be translated as 'burning sex', with joubon also meaning youth, Porn Adda relied on the quintessentially Bengali concept of *adda* to address its audience. Dipesh Chakrabarty defines *adda* as 'the practice of friends getting together for long, informal, and unrigorous conversations' (2000, 181) and argues it is a key marker of Bengali identity and intimately linked to the middle class (2000, 183). Chakrabarty also notes the term has come to be used online to describe chat sites for Bengalis from Bangladesh as well as India (2000, 181). Both Joubon Jala and Porn Adda allowed for the possibility of writing in Bengali fonts and full access to both forums is premised on a working knowledge of Bengali. Although most boards are self-explanatory, entries can be difficult to find if you don't understand Bengali

or are not using the right search terms, such as 'joubon' (sex) or *choti*.² Most contributions used roman fonts to form Bangla words or used a mix of English and Bengali. The interface of both sites used English to name the forums although some sections such as 'Choti' or 'Deshi/Bideshi' relied on a basic acquaintance with Bengali. While everyone on the sites seemed acquainted with Bengali, the fluency with which English was used varied greatly. It appeared the main users of the websites were Bengali, and self-identified as mainly based in Bangladesh, the US, India, the UK, Dubai, Australia. Muslim and Hindu, and male and female names were in use in the forums. Language use mirroring Bangladeshi inflexion ('khaite issa kore', 'oshadharon hoitase') and partaking of Bangladeshi current affairs (Were you taken by RAB?/*naki RAB e niya gese?*, referring to the Bangladeshi special police branch; or 'completely djuice'/*purai djuice!*, quoting the Bangladeshi mobile phone company Grameen Phone) suggested a large proportion of Bangladeshi users. The prevalence of Bangladeshi national symbols such as the flag or the Liberation War Monument that were displayed by users seems to confirm this. Joubon Jala was the larger site and had nearly fifty thousand members (47,538) while Porn Adda had almost twenty thousand (18,640). Joubon Jala measured time in GMT + 5.5, suggesting India, while Porn Adda maintained GMT + 6, suggesting Bangladesh. Even if there is very little that is solid in the world of the chatroom, and identities and locations are easily hidden, I am relying on these visual, linguistic and temporal indicators to posit that these particular chatrooms were used by a community that could be broadly described as Bengali oriented and geographically scattered.

Both sites hosted a range of pornography, drawn from different online sources. While Joubon Jala specifically separated out supposed 'deshi' (meaning 'of the country') materials from 'bideshi' (or foreign) material, Porn Adda made no such distinction. Joubon Jala had a category 'Deshi Gurl' and defined that as 'Hot "desi" girls' discussion. Girls from the sub-continent.' On the other hand, the 'Bideshi Gurl' section is marked 'Foreign (Non-Bangali) hot chicks'. The apparent gap between deshi/sub-continental on the one hand and foreign/non-Bangali on the other was often discussed by contributors to these sites. At Joubon Jala a contributor asked other members to guess the origin of a girl featured in the category 'Deshi Gurl'. The thumbnails of the so-called 'Mysore Mallige' video had been uploaded under the title 'aoshadharon [amazing] deshi girl in love.' Discussing the background of the girl featured, one contributor replied by saying: 'Mama [uncle], She is not deshi. She's from mysore, India.' Another claimed inside information and corroborated that 'I also have seen a small part of the video, and I know she is not from bd.' Others disagreed and where one exclaimed 'No way, she is desi!!!!!!!!!!' another claimed she was from Kolkata, referring this Mysore video to the Nalbon scandal.³ Such discussions illustrate the porosity of boundaries around the identities that were so important for participants to pin down, as they struggled to put clear distinctions in place. Porn Adda did not make any distinctions between deshi or bideshi imagery but did

have separate categories for 'Bangla Serial and Natok' and 'Bollywood, Dhaliwood & Hollywood'. This did not stop its members from discussing the vexed deshi-bideshi distinction. One contributor to Porn Adda uploaded four pictures of a brown-skinned and dark-haired girl masturbating and asked other members 'Deshi or bideshi – tell me uncles' (*Deshi na bideshi - bolento mamara*). One member responded 'uncle, I think it is a deshi living abroad' (*mama mone to hoi bideshe thaka desi*), while another suggested 'Looking, I think Indian' (*dekhi indian monee hoitasee*), while a third took the Joubon Jala route and concluded 'From what can be seen of her hair, I think she is from the subcontinent' (*Chuler arale jeituk dekha jai, sub continent eri to mone hoi*). The wealth of material on the websites was in this way divided between the porous categories of deshi and non-deshi.

Despite the confusion around the categories, members seemed clear in their preference for 'deshi' imagery, which was at any time being viewed by far more members and guests than the 'bideshi' materials. Similarly, written pornography was always in Bengali, addressed as *choti*. Such stories generally featured aunts and uncles, mothers and children, comparable to the cheaply printed written pornography that can be found in Bangladesh and West Bengal. There was no equivalent non-Bengali written pornography, highlighting the search for Bengali pornography that members seemed to be engaged in on both websites. The cut-piece was now aligned with the *choti*, the Bengali pornographic short story that, like the cut-piece, retains narrative and formal particularities (Biswas 2013). Online, the cut-pieces were put into conversation with other forms of vernacular sexually explicit cultural production. The online space allowed the articulation of, and debate around, something particularly local, described as 'deshi' or 'Bangali' that was sexually explicit. These were the artefacts of the pornographic region, even if much of it could not be definitively assigned to that imagined location. Part of the pleasure here was the speculation around the material's 'proper' location and provenance.

The main forms of deshi pornography on Joubon Jala and Porn Adda were the written *choti* stories, posed still images, some with an amateur quality to them, others with the heads of famous actresses montaged to unknown bodies, as well as hidden camera footage from hotels and internet-cafes and mobile phone footage. Besides this there was some professional imagery from individuals of South Asian descent working in America, such as the Bangladeshi porn actress Jazmin. Among all this deshi material, the cut-pieces stood out clearly from the other material on the websites due to the production values of Bangladeshi action cinema from the 1990s and 2000s. This was exacerbated by the fact that those who uploaded the cut-pieces used cheaply produced cut-piece VCDs as their source of this material; often without changing the titles given to the pieces on the VCD, uploading single songs or rape scenes via Mega-upload or Rapidshare. The quality of the VCDs meant the images often broke up. Having been taken from video-cameras set up in the cinema-halls, the angles in the cut-pieces were also decidedly odd, and the footage was poor quality. Scarred and bruised the cut-pieces arrived in

the digital domain, marked by their earlier circulation in the imperfect media environment of Bangladeshi cinema distribution, exhibition and piracy (see Srivastava 2007 on the pleasures of such imperfect images).

The cut-pieces were uploaded into specific video sections on both bulletin boards, marked 'BD movies' on JoubonJala and part of the video-forum at Porn Adda. Here a relatively small group of members uploaded Bangladeshi cinema pornography. The individuals behind the names 'BDhotguy', 'TrInItY', 'kOlkaTar_SayTan' and 'Helaloop' were prominent posters on both sites. They titled their contributions 'Uncensored BD Movie Scene', 'Hot bangla song', 'BD movie nude clip' or just 'Bangla Cinema'. Despite these titles, the uploaders of the clips frequently revealed their distance from the industry and lack of involvement in the culture of cinema hall attendance or reading film magazines. They sometimes speculated on the origin of the clips, indicating a vague awareness of the industry based on newspaper reports that circulated in Bangladesh. For example, when asked the name of the film from which a clip had been uploaded, Helaloop replied 'Uncle, I don't know the name ... where would I get that?' (*mama nam jani na ... pamu koi?*). kOlkaTar_SayTan, whose handle suggests a link to Calcutta, asked 'Have a look, do you know them, are they really Bengali cinema actors/actresses?' (*dekhen eder chen kina, era ki realy bengali cinemar abhineta/netri*). This lack of acquaintance with the industry and the city of Dhaka was also apparent when kOlkaTar_SayTan commented on a clip set in a nightclub. Nightclubs are common backdrops to cabaret-type song sequences across South Asian cinema's and feature heavily in Bangladeshi action films. There is a standard set involving a stage and a bar made out of cardboard used at the state-owned FDC studios in Dhaka. kOlkaTar_SayTan however asked: 'Uncle, are all these nightclubs in Dhaka or what?' (*Mama ei saab Night Club gula ki Dhakay naki?*). The lack of acquaintance with cut-piece materials was not only apparent among the uploaders of the footage. Those who downloaded and commented on the clips were equally amazed by them. Mituctg asked: 'are Bangladeshi cinemas gaan [songs] - I dont believe' (*sic.*). Rajon_dhk asked: 'is that really a Bangla movie?' (*eita ki asholeo bangla movie*). And m626 on Porn Adda exclaimed: 'Are they really shown on cinemas in Bangladesh?????????' (*sic.*). Sayeed on Joubon Jala was even more explicit: 'unlce, if you didn't post this stuff, I would never understand what happens at the FDC' (*mama apne agulo post na korle kono din bujhtam na FDC te ke hoy*). From such statements it is apparent that those who up- and downloaded Bangladeshi cut-pieces operated at quite a distance from the circuits of production and consumption of the celluloid industry from which these clips were originally taken.

This distance is not completely surprising. It can be understood in relation to both class position and location. From their presence online in this period of the 2000s (before the spread of smartphones and the broadening of access to the internet across the region) it is clear that these were educated and relatively wealthy Bengali speakers, most probably from middle class

households, located in South Asia and elsewhere. Their exposure to Bangladeshi action cinema was likely to be limited. Mainstream Bangladeshi action cinema of the period, as discussed above, was working class cinema, aimed at semi-urban and rural audiences. This explains why educated and middle class Bangladeshis should have expressed their surprise at finding sexually explicit material appearing from Bangladeshi cinema halls. They were unlikely to have had much exposure to the cinema halls, let alone to have frequented them. On top of this, the action cinema within which cut-pieces were produced was largely consumed nationally. Although some pirated cut-piece VCDs could be found in Calcutta, London and Dubai, Bengalis not resident in Bangladesh would have had little opportunity to see sexually explicit Bangladeshi cinema. As Labony, apparently based in the US, asked on Porn Adda: 'who are the viewers of these movies?' (*accha, ei movie gular viewers kara?*).

The distance of the online audience from the cut-pieces can also be read in other comments. Sumon711, who says he is based in Dhaka, responded to an entry titled 'Hot bangla song', that 'Bangla cinema is in such a state, it is impossible to watch it with your family. [...] The target audience for these directors are rickshaw-wallahs who are unmarried or whose wives reside in the village' (*bangle cinemar ja obostha, family nia dekhara kono sujog nai. [...]. Ei somosto porichalok der target audience hoilo rickshaw ala jara unmarried ba bou thake deshe tader jonno*). Rehearsing a common complaint about Bangladeshi mainstream cinema, Sumon711 also clearly sets himself off from the 'real' audience of these clips, namely poor labour migrants in menial jobs. The purportedly female uploader of a sexually explicit song sequence clip named Nisha titled her entry 'Ugly nude song in Bangla film' and introduced it by writing in perfect English: 'Don't know what to say about this... thought you guys might wanna see it, but don't enjoy it. There is nothing to enjoy .. *odhopoton e gese!*' The last part means 'it is morally depraved'. This judgement of 'ugliness and depravity' should be read in line with the class distinction imagined between the 'real' audience for the clips, the morally depraved rickshaw-wallah, and the community of readers gathered for the pornographic *adda* taking place online.

With the movement of cut-pieces from small town cinema halls to the long distance *addas* of internationally dispersed Bengalis, the audience and the context of reception is completely transformed. Where before the cut-pieces were embedded in the diegesis of action movies and an integral part of the movie theatre experience, now they are embedded in chatsites, alongside other Bengali and international pornography, watched from private computer screens or in internet cafes. Alongside this, however, is a sudden emergence into visibility of the racial and ethnic qualities of the imagery. Take this example: Sumon_hoq2005 expresses the common sentiment that 'the taste of BD chicks is different' (*BD maal ar shaad e alada*).⁴ Khara_dhon, supposedly based in Sydney, agrees: 'I want more. [...] Watching things from your own country has a different pleasure.' (*aro chai. [...]. Shodeshi jinish dekhara mojai alada*). Vuka agrees and says 'uncle, the pleasure in seeing the breasts of Bengali girls is different. I

feel like I am the hero' (*mama, bangali meyeder dudh dekhari mojai alada. Mone hoi ami hero*). Besides the idea of local flavour, there is also a suggestion of the possibility of identification with the imagery, mediated by a sense of ethnic or linguistic similarity that is apparently different from the identificatory process with other types of pornography. Within the context of cinema viewing in Bangladesh, this sort of utterance would be very difficult. Class boundaries make identification with mainstream cinema unlikely while racial or ethnic identification remains unremarked within an industry that is Bengali dominated and screened for largely Bengali audiences.⁵ Here in vuka's comment markers of class, attached to the theatrical context of consumption, recede in favour of markers of race and ethnicity that are imagined to be specific to the body, available on screen in the online context of consumption.

The comments illustrate the shift in emphasis from class to race. Intimacy is produced out of the possibility of identifying the visual markers of race at the site of the body, while this attribution remains continuously beset by doubts as the visual cannot offer 'sufficient' clues or bolster claims about the nature of the body represented (Poole 2005). Clues about who a person is racially or ethnically are continually sought as a means to heighten the pleasure the clips offer, but cannot be definitively found because of 'the forms of suspicion that surround visual representations and race' (Poole 2005, 161). Here race acts as a medium, as Mitchell argues, 'a vehicle for *both fantasy and reality*' (2012, 14, emphasis in original). This is why much time is spent online in parsing the location of the representational content, the origin films, the probable provenance of the imagery and the identity of the actors, the continuous debate about *deshi* or *bideshi*. There is a desire to fix these bodies as Bangladeshi or Bengali, which heightens the pleasure in consuming the material, but is continually beset by doubt.

This emphasis on the pleasures of all things Bengali is also to be found in the commentary on mobile phone footage or personal photography of Bengali subjects. However, the production of cut-pieces within the formalized cinema industry allows these clips to be discussed as national products. In fact, part of the pleasure that the cut-pieces provided is the possibility to use them to illustrate the advanced position of Bangladesh and Bengalis within the progress of nations. Replying to a clip titled 'BD Movie the most explosive Nudity Clip 19 - Nishidho Nari', someone named RestLess replies: 'Amazing, :D. Bangladesh is getting much ahead. The future of the porn industry is very good' (*Oshadharon, :D. Bangladesh onek egiye jacche. porn industry er future onek valo samne*). Similarly, Olash says: 'Bangladesh has gotten ahead a lot now, uncle, these sort of scenes are as common as milk and rice' (*bangladesh ekhon onek agaya geche mamu, eai sob scene ekhon dud bhat*). Such narratives of progress invoke plenitude. KalamamaAUS, said to be based in Australia, says on Porn Adda, 'today everything is possible in the country' (*ajkal deshe shobe shombhob*). Shonaa812 explicitly measures Bangladesh with the rest of the world by quoting a favourite political one-liner in an ironic manner: 'the country is moving in rhythm with the world' (*bissher shathe tal miliye desh agiye*

jacche). On Porn Adda and Joubon Jala sexually explicit cinema clips are discussed by way of a middle class discourse of progress vis-à-vis other nations that leans heavily on the development narratives of institutions such as the World Bank and the UNDP. Both have a strong presence in Bangladesh. Women are targeted in such development narratives and it is no coincidence that many contributors to Porn Adda and Joubon Jala invoke this in their analysis of the cut-pieces. As rajarshi5 states: 'Bangladeshi Bengali girls are very mentally advanced' (*bangladesher Bengali meyera manosik bhabe onek advanced*). The use of 'mentally' here means 'socially forward' or 'liberated'. Here we see the international development discourse, with its emphasis on female sexual health, women's rights and family planning, reproduced as pornography. The pornographic cannibalizes other discourses, including nationalist or developmentalist ones.

National progress is also measured against other places, especially those generally seen as well ahead of Bangladesh in terms of development. It is here that ethnicity becomes wedded to national belonging and progress. Responding to Nisha's suggestion of moral depravity, a member of Porn Adda named helloblue says: 'who says odhopoton [depravity] I think it's opposite don't you know we have ridden on (*sic.*) the train which is driving by USA.' Nunu_mia ('Mr. Penis') wonders 'why can't you get as much nude in Hindi cinema as you can in Bangla cinema' (*bangle cinema to joto khani nude pai hindi te oto khani pai na ken*). When a song sequence from the film *Noya Mastan* ('New Gangster', Opurbo-Ranaa 2005) appeared on the Indian website Debonairblog, its Indian users there lamented: 'I have not seen any such thing in the Indian soft porn movies. This is quite natural and the girl has acted without any inhibition. Something which is lacking in Indian movies.' Thankfully the commentary could reinstate the proper hierarchy between the 'rising superpower' and its poor neighbour by explaining the bad quality of the clip, stating that 'in Bangladesh they normally don't come out with DVD/VCD quality versions.' Another Indian contributor is willing to solve the problem by imagining a trip to one of India's neighbouring countries, of which 'many Indians choose to live in mortal fear' (Nandy 1998, 4): 'really I wanted to go to bangladesh (*sic.*) after seeing this clip.' Closer to home, KOLkaTar_SayTan asks who says that it is only Hollywood that produces films containing nudity. Polash responds by saying: 'uncle, actually Bangla movies are leaving Hollywood behind.' KOLkaTar_SayTan replies to Polash by saying 'yes, yes, uncle, well said, we will stop watching those white ones, we can get naked better than them' (*han, han, mama thik bolsen, aamra oi goragula re dekhay charbo aamra oder thekey bhalo nengto hate pari*). Nationality and ethnicity thus become mobilized within narratives of progress to discuss Bangladeshi pornography online.

The surpassing of other nations is not without its flipside however and not everyone was equally celebratory. Labony recounted on Porn Adda:

One of my friends saw it, she is american, and she said...bangladeshi movies r the most explicit among all the counties in Indian subcontinent...bollywood, tallywood, lollywood nothing can override BD films...I was like saying to myself..should I feel ashamed (*sic.*) or proud??

Labony is not the only one with this concern. Sayeed wonders: 'in which direction is our country advancing/retreating?' (*amader desh ta kon dike agacche/pechacche?*). Such misgivings pitch the cultural worth of the nation against the boons of 'progress'. Others see the hand of God. 'May Allah bless you with more such stuffs (*sic.*)', says one contributor, while another cries appreciatively: 'masha-allah masha-allah...good work man...keep it up.' Ethnic markers and national belonging are mobilized both in favour of the clips shown and against them.

In the online worlds of Bengali chatrooms in the later 2000s, cut-pieces were positioned within discussions of the fate of culture and the nation in the drive towards progress and the march of modernity. They featured in such debates in a manner very similar to the fraught discussions about cultural change incurred by playing Hindi movie songs at Bangladeshi weddings or the use of particular oils to prepare Bengali food. As Laura Kipnis has already suggested, pornography features within the boundary marking of culture and identity no differently than in other cultural production (Kipnis 1996, viii). On JoubonJala and Porn Adda, the cut-pieces were the foil to debates about identity, belonging and modernity, belaboured by anonymous, Bengali speaking, internet users. They had travelled a great distance from the single-screen rural cinema halls in which they might have originally been screened and came to mark an entirely different set of boundaries as they reached the internet.

Race and Class in Cut-Piece Pornography

While pornography in general may be good at marking cultural boundaries, as Kipnis (1996) notes, the type of boundary that is marked by a particular artefact of pornography cannot be predicted from its representational content. As I have shown, the meaning of the cut-pieces was fundamentally transformed as they traversed celluloid and digital formats and were made available in very different reception contexts. The boundary marked online in the discussions generated by the cut-pieces was a very different one to the boundary marked in debates about the cut-pieces in Bangladeshi cinema halls. In the context of theatrical exhibition, the debates generated by cut-pieces were about class and the nature of the audience for cinematic entertainment, while online they generated discussions about the place of Bengali culture and Bengali bodies within a larger global framework of cultural and national value. And where theatrical exhibition produced anxieties and excitement about *men* (rural men, working class men, men without 'proper' outlets for their sexual and entertainment needs; in a word, 'other' men), online the discussions were largely about the *women* who featured in the cut-pieces. In the cinema halls these clips marked the boundaries between classes and between the urban and

the rural via the figure of the male spectator, but online the boundaries marked were between nations and ethnicities through the figure of the female actress. Finally, the question of the ethnically marked body, a body understood to be the site of the articulation of race, only emerged significantly in the online context, where presumably the hegemonic form of pornography features white bodies. In the Bangladeshi cinema halls, with Bangladesh's longstanding controls on foreign cinema, the white body is largely absent and films are made in a hegemonically Bengali film industry, catering to an almost entirely Bengali audience.

The transition of the cut-pieces from cinema halls to online chatrooms brings sharply into focus the ways in which our thinking around pornography is ill-adapted to think through the question of race in online pornography that is not thematized for its colour and not staged for the white gaze. Much academic discussion of race in pornography, online or otherwise, has approached the question from an ethnic minorities and western race-relations perspective (Alloula 1986; Hoang 2004; Mahawatte 2004; Williams 2004; Cervulle and Rees-Roberts 2009). Studies of non-Western pornography on the other hand, emphasize the coherent cultural universe within which 'other' expressions of sexuality are embedded in radically different cultural worlds, incommensurable with western pornographic arenas (Shamoon 2004). Although insightful and critical, neither of these approaches fully captures the possibility of a pornography not staged for an imagined white audience yet participating in the aesthetics of international mainstream pornography. It is the possibility of a mode of pornography that is both in conversation with international genres while remaining locally resonant, that the cut-piece inherits from its B-circuit action-cinema parent films. Realizing such a regional pornographic aesthetic is what has given cut-pieces their longevity and allowed them to outlive the celluloid world from which they originated.

What is more, the movement of the cut-piece from celluloid to digital platforms and the transformed response they find there, provides an important impetus to rethinking the ways in which questions of race and class have been approached in the study of pornography. Ground-breaking studies in this field (Kipnis 1996; Penley 2004; Williams 2004), have tended to locate the racialized or 'classed' appeal of particular modes of pornography *within its imagery*. That is, pornography that mobilizes race or class as the means to generate bodily responses in its audience is often understood to use bodies that are marked in particular ways, specific mise-en-scène and particular forms of language, to generate that response. What the movement of the cut-pieces shows, however, is that how the pornographic imagery is received as classed or racialized, and therefore desirable or exciting, is *also* dependent on the form of exhibition or distribution and its attendant context of reception. This is a hugely significant addition to existing conversations, and one that has obvious implications for thinking about where we may 'locate' the questions of class and race in the operations of pornographic texts.

This article is set at a particular historical moment, the mid-2000s, which saw the simultaneous high water point for the production of celluloid pornography in Bangladesh and the imminent disintegration of the celluloid film industry in Bangladesh. It produced the end of the illegal production of celluloid pornographic clips as well as its revival online. In this article I have documented that moment of transition. Tracking the appearance online of celluloid cut-pieces has allowed me to make three interventions with regard to the study of pornography in South Asia. First, I have shown how the contexts of exhibition and reception are hugely significant for understanding the operation of race and class in this type of pornographic material. Second, I have suggested that once emancipated from its celluloid form, the nature of the cut-pieces as part of a regional form of sexually suggestive or explicit cinema also came more forcefully into view. This suggests that the nature of the 'regional' can be expanded in significant ways to encompass localized forms that share significant similarities, not with what is most geographically near but what is aesthetically and socially near within a certain field of filmmaking. Finally, the cut-pieces, pornographic ephemera even when they were blossoming in Bangladesh at the turn of the century, have paradoxically come to find their archive outside of their native habitat of exhibition and circulation. It is as digital clips that they have come to be archived, not unlike the vast domain of South Asian screen culture that falls between the gaps of legal, formal and respectable archives and repositories (Bull 2014; Mini 2016).

Acknowledgements

I'm very grateful for the encouragement and patience of Darshana Sreedhar Mini and Anirban Kapil Baishya as well as the helpful comments by Feona Attwood and two anonymous reviewers.

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¹ I have copied the Bengali wording of these citations as they appear online, without 'correcting' the transliteration of the Bengali as presented there.

² For example, searching the internet for 'Bangladesh' and 'Sex' leads you to numerous NGOs and charities concerned with the health of Bangladeshi sex workers, the correlations between tuberculosis outbreaks and gender, as well as sex discrimination in birth rates.

³ Both the Mysore Mallige and the Nalbon sexually explicit home videos created a scandal in India, where they were made and distributed. These videos were purported to have been accidentally made public. Both videos have reached a certain cult status and continue to circulate online. See Baishya 2017.

⁴ The multivalent *maal* is difficult to translate. Meaning anything ranging from piece to load or cargo, it is often used to address a desired person in an objectifying way. In this case 'chicks' seems to come closest to the implied meaning. See Ramaswami 2006.

⁵ The complex question of non Bengali Bangladeshis and their identification with Bangladeshi cinema is beyond the scope of this paper.